

## [Registered Nurse]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

CHARLESTON, S. C.

LIFE HISTORY.

TITLE: REGISTERED NURSE.

Date of First Writing Jan. 20, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed Mrs. John W. Conder

Fictitious Name Mrs. Remington

Street Address

Place Fairwold, S. C. ( Telegraph Station - Home of J. W. Conder, Stockyards - five miles north of Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Former Registered Nurse - Housewife.

Name of Writer F. Donald Atwell

Name of Reviser State Office.

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Project #-1655

"Speaking of life histories," Mrs. Remington, an intelligent, pleasant mannered woman of middle-age said, "I've just returned from an automobile trip from my birthplace in Virginia where I checked court records for my family history.

"I have also had a genealogical record compiled - covering both the Harris and Morton families. Harris on my father's side, and Morton on my mother's. I did this primarily for the sake of my daughter Elizabeth, eleven, whom I am sure will cherish such a record in years to come.

"My own life is really a most drab and uninteresting story. I was born fifty years ago in Lynchburg Virginia. My father, Edward Harris, was a railroad engineer and his life was one round of hard work and little pay. In those days, engines burned wood and the cars were coupled with hand pins. There were no railroad brotherhoods, or laws governing working hours, and the salaries of employees were pitifully small. On his death we were left absolutely destitute. That is the only word to describe our situation. There was only Mamma and myself, and she had to get out and try to make a living for us both. Women didn't go out and get jobs as they do today. It was a pathetic situation. Of course, relatives helped us, but most of our relatives were like ourselves - very poor.

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"About this time, Mrs. Charles Stuart, my cousin, whose husband had formerly worked on the road with my father, came up from Columbia, South Carolina where her husband had secured a good job as passenger conductor on the Southern Railway. Seeing how things were she took us back to live with her. They had no children, and Mr. Stuart was making what was then a good salary for a railroad man.

"I attended school until I was sixteen and Mrs. Stuart succeeded in getting me in the old Knowlton Hospital, now the Baptist Hospital, in Columbia, as a student nurse.

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Requirements for entrance were not strict, no high school diploma was necessary, as it is today. Of course, I have supplemented my meager education with additional reading and study.”

Row after row of bookcases filled with classics, a mahogany table on which were the current numbers of Scribners, Time, Readers Digest, National Geographic, even Fortune, and a corner table stacked with other magazines bore mute testimony to the truth of her statement.

“Student nurses in those days had it so much harder than they do today,” Mrs. Remington continued, “like railroading, there were no laws governing the number of hours a nurse stayed on duty. I have been for 48 hours on my feet without rest.

“Medicine and surgery? In those days, it was painfully crude. Especially when compared with today. In fact, the greatest progress in these two fields seem to have been made in just the last twenty-five 3 years. The operating room of a quarter-century ago seems primitive in comparison with the modernly equipped surgery. I was dumbfounded recently when I went into the operating room of a modern hospital here. Where we had only two ordinary bulbs over a plain operating table, today the modern surgeon has a battery of flood lights illuminating an operating table that is breathtaking in its mechanical beauty. We administered anaesthetics by simply pouring the ether from the can on a gauze and applying it to the patients nose. But look how they do it today! Pressure tanks, gauges, complicated equipment, skilled operators, oxygen tanks, iron lungs and attendant paraphernalia! Lord! We wouldn't have known how to begin using all this stuff. Yesterday, we had only a can of ether and a fervent hope that the life in our hands would be spared.

“Somehow, we really succeeded in saving lives in spite of the crudeness of our methods. Dr. King was one physician far in advance of his time. He certainly stressed sanitation and surgical cleanliness at all times, and his hospital enjoyed phenomenal growth. He had the reputation of having less deaths by gangrene and child-bed fever than any other

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hospital in the state. He was a remarkable man, good to his nurses, although he made them toe the mark, and they swore by him. He contributed much towards the effectiveness of modern medicine by his example and precepts. In fact, I owe my excellent training to his kindly discipline and exacting thoroughness.

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"After graduation, I wanted to get an apartment and have Mamma with me. But in the meantime my cousin and her husband had moved to Batesburg, South Carolina, where her husband was conductor on the short run to Perry, S. C. They carried Mamma with them. She wanted to wait until I had earned enough for us to live comfortably together.

"She continued to live on with them, however, not so much because she wanted to - she did most of the housework and earned what she got, but because I wasn't making much nursing. Salaries of nurses in those days were very small, never over fifteen dollars a week. It was not until thirteen years ago when I married Mr. Remington, that Mamma came to live with me. She died three years ago, after having lived with us the last ten years of her life. I am so glad that she could spend her few remaining years in peace, contented and happy. I think seeing me married to a splendid man and settled in life added to her peace of mind. She was devoted to her granddaughter of whom she was very proud.

"As a registered nurse, I handled all kinds of cases. I have served in wealthy homes, and in country shacks - I rendered my best in both places. I have often refused large sums of money to keep down scandals. I could have had many more dollars had I taken unfair advantage of my position as a nurse.

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"I recall, in particular, a case of this kind. The girl was of high school age, daughter of one of C's most prominent couples. The mother apparently was too obsessed with her innumerable social duties to give her daughter the attention she needed. The father, a prominent broker, provided the one thing that most fathers provide - money. But the companionship and guidance so sorely needed were absent. The girl became involved

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with a college boy of very undesirable character with the usual tragic results. The girl attempted to hide her condition from her teachers and her parents, and finally resorted to drugs in a last frantic attempt to remedy her mistake. It wasn't until she was forced to bed, deathly ill and bleeding profusely, that the whole sordid story was revealed.

"I had nursed her mother on a former occasion, and she called me again. The physician worked fast. We were particularly anxious to correct the girl's trouble without resorting to hospitalization. Fortunately, we succeeded. I refused a comfortable sum from her father "to please keep this quiet" - explaining that my salary covered that feature of the case. Today, that girl is married, with a splendid husband, and two lovely children. The secret rests with me, the physician, and the parties concerned. It will never be known. No nurse who values her professional reputation will violate a confidence. It is sure death to a nursing career. A nurse sees all, hears all, knows all - and keeps a tight lip. Such nurses are never idle.

"One case in particular I shall never forget. One of many, I should say! At any rate, this case is stamped indelibly in my memory. It was a young man about 28 years old. I had been called in the night by Dr. Morton who said, 'Harris, (all doctors called me Harris, and still do) there's a young fellow in that shack beyond the mill. You know, you nursed a case near there. He needs the best nurse he can get, and you're it! I'll tell you before you go, he's broke.'

"I was startled to find the young man not only highly intelligent but extremely well-educated as well. But I was too busy to do much wondering about him. He grew steadily worse. Both the doctor and I did everything humanly possible but in vain. I was alone with him the night he died. It seemed an eternity. Outside it was [?], and I had to go out and cut wood for the fire. I found I could wield an axe with the best of them. That was the most harrowing case I ever undertook. I was only twenty-five myself at the time, and I guess I made a nurses's fatal mistake of caring. I wanted so desperately for the man to live. Efforts to locate his relatives proved fruitless. The town buried him, but I have always wondered what dread secret he carried to the grave with him. He came of excellent family - no doubt of that.

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And, his education must have been acquired abroad. He had something to conceal and he succeeded admirably.

“Thirteen years ago (I was 37 and still single) I accepted a case in Bishopville, S. C. The Blakes were prominent farm folks. Substantial people I suppose you would call them. I was called to nurse Mrs. Blake's mother - a dear old lady. I enjoyed the country life - the excellent meals - the big house under the ancient oaks. They were extremely nice to me, and accepted me as one of the family. It was there that I met Mr. Remington - a dignified man of middle age with a distinguished bearing that carried conviction. I learned from the Blakes that he had lost his wife some four or five years before. Also, he had immense stockyard interest here, and that he was probably the most outstanding man in the state in his particular field.

“His visits became more frequent, and I learned to admire him tremendously. Here I was, thirty-seven years old, having put the idea of marriage entirely out of my head, falling in love with a man thirteen years my senior.

“To make a long story short, the first thing I did after we were married was to exercise my prerogative as a nurse. I made him go to the dentist - have all his teeth extracted after finding that they were poisoning his entire system. Then came his appendix. I instituted rules requiring him to rest an hour after dinner, business or no business. To regulate his diet and to get a full night's rest, every night. Today, he is sound as a dollar, and he still obeys the rules set down for him in the beginning.

“Mr. Remington's three sons by his first wife are all actively engaged in business with their father. Of his two daughters by his first wife, one is married and living in Blackville. The other is attending Winthrop College in Rock Hill, S. C.

“Mr. Remington and I have only the one child, Elizabeth, who is now in the 8th grade. I really started her off right - kindergarten and Sunday School. I chose Trinity Church, not only because it is the wealthiest church in the city, but also because it is the largest.

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I realized that she would make valuable contacts, and would meet and associate with those best fitted to assist her socially, spiritually, and morally. By attending church she has superior religious and moral advantages that would be lacking in a smaller church. I'm afraid I'm practical minded even with my moral, and spiritual life as well as my material life.

"I take an active interest in farm women's activities, and serve occasionally as county chairman or in some other capacity so as to put the farm women's problem before the legislature and other political bodies. I have spoken on numerous occasions in both the legislature and senate.

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"As regards my methods of household management, I have my own drawing account which never exceeds one hundred dollars a month for all household expenses. Employees about the stock barns do all outside work in conjunction with their regular duties, so I have only the expense of a cook and maid.

"I have every modern convenience and enjoy the social and material advantages that money can buy. But I still remember those former years - how can I forget - when I stood on my feet for countless hours by the bedside of some patient.

"Now, I can afford the best medical attention obtainable - day nurses, night nurses, and specialists, should the need for them arise. When we do require such attention, as we occasionally do, I treat the nurse as an honored guests. Its hard on her at best, and the best for her is none too good.

"I ought to know - I used to be one."